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Senate Democratic Leader Lauren Book and Representative Robin Bartleman File Legislation to Protect Victims of Criminal Offenses

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – Today, in a step toward establishing comprehensive protections for victims of crime, [Senate Democratic Leader Lauren Book \(D-Davie\)](#) and [Representative Robin Bartleman \(D-Weston\)](#) have jointly filed legislation to ensure crime victims are not only represented but fully protected and supported in depositions and court proceedings. This legislative proposal ([SB 466 / HB 469](#)) is not merely a procedural change; it is a resounding declaration that the rights, well-being, and dignity of victims must take precedence within the criminal justice system.

"Fear should never be a barrier to justice," says **Senate Democratic Leader Lauren Book**, renowned for her tireless advocacy to combat sexual assault and champion victims' rights. "Innocent victims who have suffered horrific crimes should not be retraumatized or blamed for violent acts committed against them. While maintaining the rights of all parties involved, we must do all we can to ensure victims of crime receive due protection and support under the law."

The proposed legislation marks a transformative shift in victim's advocacy by addressing two critical aspects. First, at the request of a victim or their family/guardian, legal counsel retained by the victim may be present during any victim deposition. Second, it mandates that the results of toxicology screening conducted as part of a sexual assault forensic exam can not be used to prosecute a victim for misdemeanor drug charges.

"Only two in ten sexual assault victims actually report the crime to law enforcement. This is a travesty. Victims do not receive justice and perpetrators are left on the street to reoffend," says **Representative Robin Bartleman**. "This bill provides them the support needed to navigate the process and alleviates some of their fears. A sexual assault is NEVER a victim's fault and we must ensure that they are not afraid to report these heinous crimes."

Florida's Constitution already grants victims the right to seek legal advice, but this legislation goes beyond, guaranteeing victims' legal counsel a "seat at the table" at crucial times during the criminal justice process. Regarding immunity from prosecution based on toxicology reports, the bill proposes that results from toxicology screenings conducted as part of sexual assault forensic exams cannot be wielded against victims for misdemeanor drug charges. This provision aims to support public safety and offender accountability by removing a significant barrier to reporting sexual violence for survivors who fear being blamed for their assault.

The proposed legislation is shaped and supported by victims advocates across the state, including **RISE**, a national civil rights nonprofit that worked with Congress to implement a Sexual Assault Survivors' Bill of Rights, and the **Florida Council Against Sexual Violence**, a statewide nonprofit organization committed to victims and survivors of sexual violence and the sexual assault crisis programs that serve them.

Learn more about the need for this bill:

- Survivor **Sabrina Sivert**, advocate with **RISE**: "I'll never forget the day I walked into the police station to get help after I was sexually assaulted. I felt so alone and carried so much fear of what was to come. I was questioned, doubted, and had to relive my worst days, sharing the graphic details of what happened. During this time period I was never offered a victim advocate or other basic survivor rights and was forced to navigate a broken legal system alone."
- **Sheena Lewis, MSW**, survivor and victim's advocate: "The Florida Legislature has led the nation in defining and protecting crime victims' rights, including the right to privacy, while the criminal justice system continues to implement trauma-informed responses that support survivors during investigation and prosecution. Florida's Constitution affords victims the right to hire private counsel to ensure their rights are protected, but it doesn't guarantee that attorney a seat at the table at critical times in the process. Ensuring the victim's privacy rights are protected is not a prosecuting attorney's responsibility. As a survivor and someone who works with survivors, I know just how frightening depositions can be. I know why victims drop out during this stage of the process. Permitting a victim's private attorney and a victim advocate to be present during deposition ensures a victim's rights are protected and wellbeing supported during one of the most intimidating and hostile proceedings in the criminal justice process."
- **Jennifer L. Dritt**, Executive Director of the **Florida Council Against Sexual Violence**: "Offenders use drugs and alcohol to render men, women, and even children more vulnerable to assault. Whether substances

are taken willingly or without a victim's knowledge, drug and alcohol-facilitated sexual assault is far less likely to be reported because victims fear they will be blamed for the violence someone else perpetrated against them. This bill directly addresses a significant barrier to reporting sexual violence and, in doing so, will increase public safety."

- Survivor **Emily Meinke**, advocate with **RISE**: "As a survivor myself, I can tell you that victims of sexual assault and sexual violence often feel scared, anxious and lost; they feel they lack control and cannot trust others or themselves. We must change the landscape of the legal system to support survivors throughout their journey, starting from the very beginning by informing them of their rights and allowing an advocate to be present every single step of the way."

This collaborative effort by **Senate Democratic Leader Lauren Book** and **Representative Robin Bartleman** signifies a profound commitment to creating a more just, compassionate, and balanced criminal justice system for survivors.

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